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Looking back on Angola

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recently deplored what he called "the loss of nerve of the establishment that ran foreign policy in the postwar period and then conspicuously failed in Vietnam." In a "conversation" with Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan transcribed for Public Opinion magazine, Kissinger went on to say:

"In every confrontation (with the Soviet Union), we could have had the upper hand. We had them defeated in Angola and then we defeated ourselves."

Kissinger obviously was referring to 1975 when three Angolan forces were competing for control after independence from Portugal — the FNLA, led by Holden Roberto and long supported by the United States; UNITA, under the direction of Jonas Savimbi, which also received some American backing in 1975; and the MPLA, led by Agostinho Neto and armed by the Soviet Union.

The MPLA ultimately triumphed and organized the government in power today. But that came about only after powerful Cuban military intervention, which threw back a South African strike force supporting Savimbi, and after the U.S. Senate on Dec. 19, 1975, approved legislation preventing further covert aid to any of the forces in Angola.

Is Kissinger correct, then, that in Angola the United States "defeated itself" in a battle it should have won? A remarkable article by Nathaniel Davis, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs in 1975, suggests that if so the reason was bad policy choices by the Ford administration, not a failure of American nerve.

Writing in the current issue of Foreign Affairs, Davis offers strong evidence not only that at no point did we have the MPLA, the Cubans or the Soviets "defeated" in Angola; but also that a \$32 million CIA effort on behalf of the Roberto and Savimbi forces was undertaken by President Ford and Kissinger only after strong warnings from Davis and others that it probably would not work and might well make matters worse.

Davis chaired, for example, a National Security Council task force on Angola that recommended on June 13, 1975, against covert military intervention. Such a step, the report said, would commit U.S. resources and prestige in a situation over which the nation had little control and where the outcome was doubtful; it would cause increased involvement by the Soviet Union in response; it would run a high risk of exposure, with adverse effect on American relations with the MPLA, in the event that group should come to power, and with a number of African and Third World

states; and it would necessarily increase the level of violence with no guarantee of accompanying success.

The Task Force recommended, instead, a "diplomatic option" — intensive private efforts with Portugal, interested African governments and the Soviet Union to shift the Angolan struggle from the military to the political arena, where the task force believed the Roberto-Savimbi factions, rather than Soviet arms, would prove dominant. But at the direction of the National Security Council staff, the task force recommendation was presented to the NSC as only one of three options; the others were a "hands-off" policy or covert military intervention.

Davis pressed his case with Secretary Kissinger in numerous memoranda. But in the end the president and the secretary chose covert intervention anyway — first \$6 million in guns and cash for the Roberto and Savimbi forces, then \$14 million, finally \$32 million before the Senate called a halt.

At that point, six months after the task force report, every one of its dire predictions as to the results of military intervention had come true. What might have happened had the diplomatic option been chosen will never be known, but Davis still thinks "we would have done better at least to try that other course."

As for whether the intervention was a major reason for the later arrival of Cuban troops in Angola, Davis is cautious; but he does observe that major interventions, by Zaire, Cuba and South Africa, all took place in the last half of 1975; and he concludes that "the answer seems to be that the escalations mutually produced counter-escalations."

By December 1975, in any case, when the Ford administration was calling for further intervention and scolding Congress for its lack of resolution and nerve (which Kissinger apparently still was doing three years later in the Public Opinion transcript), it was clear, Davis writes, that "a large and rapidly escalating military and financial commitment would have been necessary to have any hope of blocking an MPLA victory."

Six months earlier, he had warned Kissinger that "if we go in, we must go in quickly, massively and decisively enough to avoid the tempting, gradual, mutual escalation that characterized Vietnam." But it was just that "tempting" course that Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford tried to follow; that Congress blocked; and for the lack of which Kissinger now complains that "we defeated ourselves" in Angola.